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SUBJECT: BELARUS' REGIONAL INDEPENDENT NEWSPAPERS TELL THEIR STORIES  
OF SURVIVAL

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¶1. Summary. Brest is the most progressive Oblast in Belarus in terms of media freedom. Nevertheless, two Brest Oblast newspaper editors shared with CDA their difficulties, including having reliable access to the state monopoly distribution networks, unhampered ability to raise revenues through advertising, and consistent decisions and access to public officials, in their continuing efforts to provide an independent news perspective to the Oblast's population. End Summary.

¶2. Despite an array of obstacles, regional newspapers in Brest continue to provide readers with an independent voice free of direct government control. During a February 3-4 visit to the historic city of Brest, along the Polish border in southwestern Belarus, the CDA met separately with editors of two regional weeklies, who provided a first-hand account of the pressures faced by independent publishers. According to Viktor Marchuk, editor-in-chief of the Brestskaya Gazeta (circulation 8000), one of two independents currently operating in the city of Brest, authorities allow his newspaper access to local state-owned distribution and subscription services. He views the access as "an experiment by national authorities" to gauge the effects of non-state media on the local public.

¶3. While distribution may be more accessible than in other regions, Marchuk shares many of the problems faced by other independent publishers throughout the country. Advertising is difficult to generate. He told us that two state-owned banks, historically the paper's biggest advertisers, had pulled advertisements that month after being directed by "Minsk" to advertise only through the government media. Access to public officials is routinely denied. Marchuk explained that it was difficult for Brestskaya Gazeta to gain accreditation so that its reporters can cover government events and institutions, and that state officials are reluctant to grant interviews.

¶4. Marchuk carries out his work in the knowledge that his operations are subject to official scrutiny. As evidence, following his meeting with the CDA, the Brest KGB press service phoned him to inquire about his discussion with the American Ambassador. Marchuk said he kindly replied that he had not spoken with the American Ambassador as there was none in Belarus but he did interview the Charge and the text of the interview could be found in his next paper. The KGB officer, he said, quickly asked him if it had gone to print, and Marchuk told him the officer could step out of his office and find the newspaper at the local kiosk. Nevertheless, Marchuk did say he was worried that the reported conversation could lead the authorities to raise new problems for him and his newspaper.

¶5. Chief editor Lidziya Tsaluyka of the weekly Gazeta Dlya Vas (circulation 4000), based in the town of Ivatsevichy, in the Brest Oblast, described how her paper has regained circulation rights after being pulled from the state distribution network in ¶2006. However, she characterized the situation as only slightly improved, with the paper facing limits on subscription services and available only in Ivatsevichy district despite being licensed to work in four districts within the Brest Oblast. As among independents elsewhere, Gazeta Dlya Vas has difficulty finding advertisers, and according to Tsaluyka, faces hostility from some officials that borders on "cold hate."

¶6. Tsaluyka's operations remain subject to arbitrary official pressure that can lead to her paper being removed from newsstands. She described one such occasion when, after running an unflattering article about a local factory director, her paper disappeared from the kiosks owing to technical issues involving an incorrect date in the story. At the same time, Tsaluyka has achieved some success in developing relationships and reporting on matters of concern involving criminal law enforcement and fire-fighting activities. She also has achieved success in niche advertising in the automobile market where her paper has a following.

¶7. Comment. Description of difficulties faced by the editors we met in the Brest Oblast is consistent with those of their counterparts throughout Belarus, even though they have better access to the state distributions system than independents in other Oblasts. Also upon returning to Minsk, we learned from the independent Belarusian Association of Journalist that the Presidential Administration, allegedly the President's Chief of Staff himself, had called in the previous month the CEOs of bank and had instructed them to stop advertising in independent newspapers. That said, the independents, despite the obstacles, appear to be playing a role, albeit modest, in offering readers a limited alternative to state media, which is especially

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important in smaller towns and cities where internet penetration remains limited to non-existent. End Comment.  
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